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ABSTRACT

A review of literature and a survey of 218 adult students (44% return) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, revealed a surprisingly large number (about one-third) of reentry students are those labeled "established." They are married, 30-50 years old, likely to have children, and live in a dual worker/career marriage within commuting distance of the university. Spouse example was influential in encouraging them to reenter, and family support has been maintained during the education process. If there were changes in family interaction, they were reported as more likely to be positive than negative. Most students reenter as sophomores, make satisfactory progress, and achieve excellent grades in an earnest effort to earn a degree. With the exception of men in engineering, sex-role stereotyping is not apparent in gender-differentiated analysis of the three most common major fields of study. These reentry students do not seem likely to present unusual demands on the university resources or teaching skills. On the contrary, these students are serious about their education and provide unique potential resources for both individual instructors and institutions. In addition, they are likely to promote the goals of the university in the future. (KC)

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No. 67 Spring 1990

Teaching-Learning Issues

Characteristics of "Established" Students: A Descriptive Study of Married 30-50 Year Old Reentry Students

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This number of TEACHING/LEARNING ISSUES has been prepared by Jeanette D. Wilson, who received the Ph.D. in Child and Family Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 1989.

You can not teach a man anything;
you can only help him to find it
within himself.

Galileo

Learning Research Center
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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Students over age 35 are now the fastest growing segment of reentry students (i.e. undergraduate college students over the age of 24). However, information about these individuals, who are likely to be established in work, community, and family, has been obscured by including them within the total sample in studies of reentry students over 24. As is true in educating other students, understanding the unique characteristics of these "established" students is essential to successful teaching and learning.

Overview of Reentry College Enrollment

Until after World War II, when veterans (for the most part young men) entered college classrooms in large numbers, most teaching was designed for the traditional age student. This unprecedented entry of adults into the college classroom provided challenges to even the most adaptive institutions and placed unexpected demands on professors whose experiences and training had been in educating adolescents. Although this movement may have been disruptive to the status quo, strong social and institutional imperatives served to ease resistance and encourage adaptation to the influx of nontraditional age students into college. The fact that these older students were mostly males (as were traditional age students) whose educations had been interrupted or delayed by conscription for national defense gave social sanction to their off-time educational endeavors. Any initial resistance from educational institutions was ameliorated by the initial economic gain provided by government subsidies to the returned G.I.'s, and the secondary gain provided by increased educational aspirations in the general population.

In the early 70's, due in part to changing family patterns and the influences of the women's movement, women of all ages began to demand access to college educations in ever growing numbers. Especially noticeable was the large number of women over 24 searching for

meaning in their lives outside the family environment (McGraw, 1982). This demand was often in opposition to social norms and challenged many stereotypical notions, inspiring feminist advocacy and research, such as that of Astin (1976), Brandenberg (1974), and Christian & Wilson (1985). The influx of adult women stretched the adaptive capacities of college educators once again. Although the reentry rate for men and women has become very similar (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1983), persistent gender bias in favor of men has been of concern to educators and feminist scholars for the past two decades. This concern has resulted in a proliferation of studies of reentry women, but there has been no similar widespread advocacy for men.

As testimony to the success of these two movements, approximately 45% of total undergraduate college student enrollment is now made up of reentry students (i.e., adults of both sexes, 24 or older), 60% of whom are enrolled in degree programs (The College Board Office of Adult Learning, 1988). Rather than finding them a burden, many faculty members . . . "find it a joy to teach students who are in college for a definite purpose, who want what higher education can offer them and who are dedicated in their efforts to earn a degree" (Kelley, 1989).

Contemporary Trends. Yet another challenging opportunity for educators is becoming apparent in the 15-year national trend in which students over age 30 have become a gradually expanding proportion of college undergraduate enrollment. Predictions of older student enrollments, based on analysis of cohort and participation rates, project a continuation of this established trend at least through the year 2000 as the population mean-age increases (Brazziel, 1987; Crimmins & Riddler, 1985; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1987). As yet there is not a wide body of knowledge about these more mature students who are likely to be established in family, work, and community. It is the purpose of this study to discover the characteristics of these established students whose unique qualities and problems have generally been masked within studies in which the larger portion of reentry students have been cohorts between 24 and 30.

Marital Status. Reentry students 30 years of age or older are likely to be married. In spite of the rising divorce rate and an increasing number of single parent families, most men and women over age 30 are married, and the marital rate increases as age advances toward 50 (Statistical Abstract of the U.S., U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1988). Marital status typically has been a variable in studies of women reentry students and has been found to be both a barrier and a stimulus to the educational and career plans of women

(MacKinnon-Slaney, 1987; MacKinnon-Slaney, Barber and Slaney, 1988). Although marital status has not been typically investigated as an influential variable in relation to reentry men, it seems logical to assume that it is influential on the education of men as well as women.

For some time, the dynamic interactions of family systems and academic performance have been examined empirically in school age children, but the interactions between family and students in higher education have not been adequately explored (Gilbert, 1982). Recent trends in demographics and the changing age characteristics of adults enrolled in higher education suggest a need to investigate the interactions of family and education among married reentry college students and to differentiate these characteristics on the basis of gender and age.

Current Study

Approximately 17% of the undergraduate students at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville are reentry students enrolled in baccalaureate programs. Of these students, approximately one of three are over the age of 35 (University of Tennessee Student Statistics, 1987). This study describes some collective characteristics of married reentry students, 30 to 50 years of age, through several demographic, personal, educational, and family variables and differentiates several of these characteristics by gender. Unlike many of their younger reentry counterparts, these students are established in many aspects of community, work, and family and will be referred to in this study as "established."

Established Reentry Student Profile

A mailed survey questionnaire from the Learning Research Center of The University of Tennessee, Knoxville garnered a 44% return rate and provided information from 218 married reentry students between the ages of 30 and 50. The sample was found to be predominantly white and middle class, comprised of 60% women and 40% men. The mean age of respondents was 36.2, with no significant difference in the mean age of men and women, although men were somewhat younger than women, such that half of all women were age 36 or less and half of all men were 33 or less. Approximately 20% of women students and approximately 26% of men students were 40 and over.

All subjects were part of an intact marriage and over two-thirds of them reported having children living in their homes. Approximately one-third of respondents indicated that they had at least one adolescent child. Over 60% of the subjects were from the

region served by the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Forty-three percent of these established students grew up in Knoxville or in close proximity to it. Over 88% of the students lived within what they consider commuting distance to classes, and did not relocate in order to reenter an undergraduate program.

Family Influences on the Reentry Decision. The educational history of the family was investigated in order to understand the extent to which parental or spousal example or encouragement might have influenced the decision to reenter. The data revealed that mothers of enrolled students averaged 11.8 years in school, fathers averaged 12.1 years in school, and spouses averaged 17.2 years of school, with over 30% of husbands and 15% of wives having had some graduate education. When asked to indicate who influenced them the most in the decision to go back to school, 42% of the respondents named their spouses as the most influential persons, 12% named friends, and 7.7% named employers. Parents were not listed as "most influential," but were named as "somewhat influential" by 13% of the respondents. Clearly, spouses influenced the reentry decision more than any significant other in the students' lives, although a wide majority of students indicated they did not return to school in order to keep pace with their spouses. Comparative examination of the responses from men and women revealed very similar rates of responses regarding parental influences. Analysis of the responses regarding spousal influence did not reveal significant differences between men and women, nor between the 30-40 and 41-50 year olds.

Educational Attainment. Some portions of the general public and even some educators have assumed that older cohorts of adult students enroll in higher education without serious intent of completing a degree. However, results of this study demonstrated that the effort, aspirations, and educational attainment of established married reentry students portray serious intent and effort. The typical 30-50 year old student entered college as a sophomore after being out of school an average of nearly 12 years, and had attained junior status at the time of this survey. The mean time in school since reentry was seven quarters during which time the student carried approximately ten credit hours per term. A male student was more likely to be enrolled in education (27%); the second highest male enrollments occurred in business administration (20%) and engineering (20%). In a somewhat reverse pattern, women were more likely to be enrolled in business administration (28%) or education (19.2%). The third highest female enrollment was in liberal arts (14.4%).

General confidence in personal ability as well as high achieve-

ment was reflected in the self-reports of grade point average (3.25) which was higher than the actual GPA (2.77) of all reentry students at The University of Tennessee (University of Tennessee Student Statistics, 1987). Women's grade point distribution was skewed toward higher grades than men's grade point distribution, with the 50th percentile for women located at 3.45 and the 50th percentile for men at just under 3.00. These findings substantiate Von Embse and Child's (1979) findings that college students over age 28 and married women were more likely to be high achievers.

University of Tennessee students evaluated themselves positively for the correctness of their reentry decisions. Plans for continuing their educations revealed high motivation to succeed, with over 95% of all students reporting plans to get degrees. Half of the men and 60% of the women also indicated they were planning to get advanced degrees.

Employment. Most subjects reported that they were attending college in addition to working. Approximately two-thirds of the students work, and one-third of them work a full 40 hours per week. Analysis revealed that men worked significantly more hours than women (Men = 29.6, Women = 17.7, p. .00). However, as noted earlier, most of the families had children, and women characteristically perform the childcare and household chores in addition to work and school roles. This may influence the gender difference which was apparent between the number of hours worked by the spouse: wives work somewhat fewer hours (M=32.3, SD=17.7, $p \leq .00$) than husbands of students (M=43.4, SD=13.4, $p \leq .00$). No significant difference was found between the family income of male and female students; this lack of disparity may be explained by the finding that most families are dual income families. The value placed by employers on subjects' further education was evidenced by the fact that 36% of all respondents received financial assistance from their employers.

Problems Encountered by the Student. Students were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale the seriousness of 12 problems commonly discussed in the literature on reentry students (Table 1). Examination of the means of the responses did not indicate that any of the problems under investigation were considered especially serious by the respondents. In general, married reentry students did not feel that going back to school increased their problems with family or employment. Surprisingly, these established older students did not feel that their age was a barrier to education, nor did they suffer from lack of self-confidence or from feeling out of place with others in the classroom. Only four problems slightly exceeded mid-point (3.0) on the scale, thus indicating that they might be of

TABLE 1
Problems of Reentry Students
Mean and Percent Indicating Problem Was Serious

N=218	ALL		Women	Men
Problem	Mean	St. Dev.	%	%
1. Commuting distance	2.38	1.41	29.9	13.6
2. Financial Concerns	3.12	1.44	37.0	47.7
3. Paper work for re-entry	2.24	1.20	14.2	18.2
4. Class schedules	3.24	1.21	47.0	40.9
5. Rusty Skills	3.02	1.34	37.6	37.9
6. Lack of confidence	2.59	1.27	28.1	24.0
7. Self-conscious of age	2.30	1.28	24.4	22.7
8. Inappropriate assignments	2.46	1.28	24.4	22.7
9. Lack of employer support	1.66	1.08	11.6	5.9
10. Lack of family support	1.78	1.16	14.1	8.0
11. Credit for experience	2.79	1.49	41.6	32.2
12. Delay of gratification	3.01	1.29	36.5	43.0

serious concern: class schedules, financial problems, rusty skills, and delaying purchases and pleasures. The problems of securing convenient class schedules and meeting the financial demands of college were problems facing all students and are not unique to reentry students. To some extent, the problem of delay of gratification may be exacerbated for the reentry student because of his or her perception that the family makes sacrifices in order to accommodate the student. The fourth problem that was of concern to established students, polishing rusty academic skills, may be the most unique problem faced by the student who has been out of the classroom for some time.

Although most problems were not rated dissimilarly by men and women, examination of gender differences (Table 1) reveals that women were more likely than men to indicate difficulty with the problems associated with reentry into college. Men perceived financial concerns, the paperwork necessary to accomplish college reentry, and delayed purchases and pleasures as more serious problems than did women. Noticeable differences, in which more women rated the problem as more serious than did men, were found in the areas of self-consciousness about age, lack of employer and family support, lack of credit for outside experience, and commuting distance. Women's problems generally reflected affective concerns and men's problems generally reflected structural concerns. Analysis of these problems

revealed that only lack of credit for experience outside the classroom was statistically different for men and women, with women expressing this complaint more than men.

In addition to these responses, respondents were also invited to comment about their problems or to add any that were not listed. The following responses were typical:

Man/43	"Paying never-used activity fees . . . Parking is also a grave problem"
Woman/40	"Too many required courses"
Man/30	"Lack of instructor perceptions, difficulty 'fitting in'"
Woman/37	"Child care"

The additional comments that were made may indicate that the student was not aware of services, had not located the appropriate student services, or had unrealistic expectations of academia, as much as indicating a lack of attention by the University. The University does provide a comprehensive Reentry Student Handbook, holds orientation meetings for reentry students, provides some child care services, counseling, and relief from activity fees for those who register through the evening school. In addition, it has provided seminars to sensitize professors and graduate instructors to the characteristics and needs of reentry students. There is an on-going ad hoc committee responsible for keeping the chancellor's office informed of emerging problems and for suggesting solutions to problems unique to reentry students. Some problems, such as lack of convenient parking on campus, were problems faced by all students and not peculiar to The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Reasons for Reentry. When asked to indicate the most important reasons for reentering school, six statements comprised over 80% of the responses (Table 2). The majority of reasons given by all students for returning to college represented concern for personal fulfillment (approximately 58%); that is, the respondent had always wanted to go back to college, felt ready for more education, had a desire to make a change in his or her life, or wanted to raise his or her status. Only a quarter of the subjects indicated that career advancement or interest in changing careers was the most important reason for returning to higher education. As a whole, for established married university students, personal satisfaction and self-fulfillment were clearly important reasons for reentry, followed closely by career considerations.

Examination of the gender differentiated descriptive statistics (Table 2) revealed that men and women tended to give somewhat

TABLE 2
Why Did You Return to College?
(Most Frequently Cited "Important Reasons")

Reason	All	Men	Women
1. Something I always wanted to do	25.3	17.7	20.6
2. Needed to make changes	14.4	14.0	16.6
3. In order to advance in my career	12.2	18.6	8.0
4. In order to change my career	12.1	10.9	9.7
5. I was ready for more education	10.1	9.9	6.7
6. In order to gain status	8.6	8.7	7.3

similar responses to the question, "Why did you go back to school?" More women than men rated higher "something I always wanted to do" and "I felt a need to make changes in my life;" while men rated higher "to make changes in my career," "to advance in my career," "I was ready for more education," and "to raise my status." The greater emphasis men place on work, status, and readiness for more education may reflect that women typically work in jobs where advancement is less likely, perceive themselves as less likely to change careers due to family obligations, or place their husbands' careers first. This analysis revealed that women are somewhat more influenced by concerns about personal development, and that men are more influenced by career concerns. It is noteworthy, however, that the second highest reason for men to reenter college was in the area of personal development.

Description of Personal and Family Variables

Age. Neugarten (1973) observed that age is one of the measures which we use to evaluate ourselves by comparing our present life with earlier expectations and the accomplishments of our peers. Self-evaluation based on age appears to be crucial at certain times, and might be especially critical when undertaking an off-time transition, such as returning to college after having become employed and having established a family. Off-time students might be expected to suffer a diminished self-esteem, higher stress levels, and a lower perception of the reentry situation (i.e., feeling ill at ease in classes, feeling out of step with peers, experiencing stress over age, wondering if a good decision has been made, being in school too long) due to reentering college. However, correlation of age (Table 3) with several scales measuring personal evaluation and family interactions produced a significant positive relationship with both self-

TABLE 3
Correlation and Reliability (Alpha) of Scales

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. *Self-Esteem* Alpha = .86	—	.41***	.12*	.26***	.22***	.18***	.16***
2. *Eval. of Re-entry* Alpha = .62		—	-.27***	.02	.02	.05	.24***
3. *Stress* Alpha = .88			—	-.07	-.02	-.02	-.13*
4. *Affective Support* Alpha = .78				—	.80***	.69***	.06
5. *Spouse Approval* Alpha = .78					—	.67***	.03
6. *Instrumental Help* Alpha = .75						—	.06
7. *Age*							—

*p≤.05
**p≤.01
***p≤.001

esteem (r=.16, p.≤.01), and perception of the reentry situation (r=.24, p.≤.01) and a significant negative relationship with stress.

These results suggested that for established reentry students increasing age is associated with higher self-esteem, lower stress levels, and more positive attitudes toward the problems incurred in reentry.

Spouse Support. Further inspection of Table 3, not surprisingly, revealed that spouse approval and affective support have a high significant positive relationship with each other, such that affective support is related positively (r=.80, p. < .001) to spouse approval and also to giving structural help to the reentry spouse (r = .69, p. ≤ .001). Spouse approval of the student's undertaking was also strongly related to giving structural help (r = .67, p. ≤ .001). Age was not found to be related significantly with any of the spousal variables. It would appear that either the more the spouse approved the educational undertaking of the student the more he or she provided emo-

tional support and helped the student in day-to-day activities, or that individuals in families where such spousal support was available were more likely to reenter college, regardless of the age of the student.

Personal Evaluation of Reentry. Examination of several items within the personal evaluation scale used in the above correlation revealed that there was very little difference between the way men and women evaluated their reentry into college. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents (women, 64.9%; men 65.5%)

TABLE 4
Percentage of Reentry Men and Women Indicating Increased Stress After Reentry

Stress	% Women	% Men
Difficulty managing children	39.1	31.8
Children not doing well in school	14.8	5.7
Children not satisfied with school	12.5	2.3
Demands from children's activities	51.1	39.8
Children resent helping with housework/childcare	31.3	15.9
Fulfilling parental role	64.2	54.5
Spouse resents demands on your time	43.2	44.2
Family members demand more equality	28.2	22.2
Fulfilling spouse roles	73.5	71.6
Family illness	35.9	9.0
Personal illness	37.0	29.6
Unfinished tasks	79.7	80.6
Balancing work, family, school	88.5	81.8
Volunteer work	33.6	30.6
Work demands	46.9	50.8
Work performance	33.9	40.7
Financial concerns	56.1	59.0
Conflicting time demands	89.1	84.1
Relationships with friends	51.6	39.8
Relationships with relatives	31.5	22.7
Doubt whether you have made the right decisions	23.4	20.6
Planning for the future	33.1	34.9
Satisfaction with life	28.8	26.8

N=218, Women=128, Men=88

found it difficult to decide to return to college, while more women (66%) than men (57.7%) felt they had been in school too long. Nonetheless, 99% of reentry women and 98% of reentry men indicated that they felt that returning to school was a good decision.

Stress. Most of the stresses reported by respondents were those related to balancing and finishing tasks, conflicting time demands, and interpersonal relationships (Table 4).

Some respondent comments about increased stress due to reentry revealed additional information about the stresses:

Woman/33	"No time for oneself"
Man/37	"Self-esteem, growth"
Woman/43	"Sudden insecure feelings during tests"
Man/33	"Stressed to make good grades"
Woman/30	"Homework time"
Man/41	"Insensitivity of professors to time demands"
Woman/41	"Made to feel guilty"
Man/30	"Multi-roles, father, spouse, student, etc."
Man/30	"Lost friends due to return to school"

Although most respondents suffered some stress from structural constraints after reentering college, and three-quarters of them indicated it was more difficult to fulfill the spousal and the parental role, an amazing 30% evaluated themselves as less stressed. Several comments reveal the content of this seemingly paradoxical situation:

Woman/38	"Being back in school has been personally rewarding for me, but a stress on my relationship with my family."
Man/30	"My life satisfaction has increased. I enjoy the academic environment . . . conflict with spouse increased."

Other comments revealed increased capacity and/or increased effort to deal with family members in more positive ways than before reentry:

Woman/45	"Taking classes gives me personal satisfaction (I can apply what I learn) . . . help my family and others."
Man/41	"The experience is all positive. I feel much better about myself as a result of reentry . . . family life . . . improved."

Within marriage, those who experienced the most help and highest degrees of affective support have been found to be less stressed (Burke and Weir, 1977). Reentry men have been found to get more affective support and more help (McLaughlin, 1985). Thus, we expected to find that more reentry women would report increases in stress than would men. In general, this assumption was confirmed in affective areas and areas of time and task management, but more men reported increased stress in work related areas, and surprisingly, in fulfilling the parental role (Table 4).

Family Interactions.

What effect does the off-time transition to higher education have on relationships within the family? It is natural to wonder whether reentering college as a married and established individual might be harmful to parent-child and spouse interactions. In order to gain some understanding of this issue, we asked the student to indicate the amount of their agreement with each of two statements concerning these two family relationships.

Parenting. Kelly (1982) found that when the mother returned to college she spent less time with her child, but reported the child received more quality contact, and that the fathers in a mother-reentered family also were reported to have improved contact. In the present study, in response to the statement concerning relationships with adolescent children, approximately 30% of reentry women and 45% of reentry men who had adolescent children (total = 78 homes with adolescents) indicated their relationship with their child increased in quality after their reentry. Although this increase was not necessarily due to the parent's reentry, fewer than 15% of women and 21% of men disagreed with the statement that the quality of their relationship with their adolescent improved. Authentic sharing of the student experience with an adolescent child may be one of the few opportunities a parent has to step back into a role generally assigned to adolescence without compromising parental roles. Reentry parents perceived it as well received by adolescents.

Marital relationship. Nearly one-third of male respondents (31%) agreed that their marital relationship had become stronger as a result of the reentry experience, as did a similar (32%) number of women. Approximately one-quarter of men (25%) and women (23%) indicated the marital relationship had not become stronger, and approximately 40% indicated no difference. Overall, approximately three-quarters of the respondents described the marital relationship as staying the same or becoming stronger. Once more, it is important to note that factors other than a spouse returning to college may have had more influence on this response. Gender

similarities in response rates suggested that even though women experienced more stress in affective areas than did men, the notion that a woman's reentry into higher education was more harmful to marriage than a man's reentry is not substantiated.

Summary

A surprisingly large number (approximately one-third) of reentry students are those we labeled "established." They are married, 30-50 (though mainly 40 and under), likely to have children, and live in a dual worker/career marriage within commuting distance to the University. Spouse example was influential in encouraging them to reenter, and family support has been maintained during the education process. If there were changes in family interaction, they were reported to be more likely positive than negative.

Established reentry students are most often part of the indigenous population of the region served by the University, and likely to stay within the area. Most reenter as sophomores, make satisfactory progress and achieve excellent grades in an earnest effort to earn a degree. With the exception of men in engineering, sex-role stereotyping is not apparent in gender-differentiated analysis of the selection of the three most common major fields of study. These established reentry students do not seem likely to present unusual demands on The University of Tennessee, Knoxville resources or teaching skills; their achievements and educational aspirations validate their ability to learn well and achieve high educational goals.

Unique Potential Contributions. It is apparent that those married 30-50 year old reentry students, referred to here as established, are serious about their education and have undertaken it primarily for personal development as well as increased career opportunities. Rather than bundles of distinct problems, they provide unique potential resources for both individual instructors and for institutions. As highly motivated, serious, and able, they are often among the highest performing students in a course and thus a potential model for others. They are clear about their reasons for seeking higher education and have made a decision to gain more education as a result of personal commitment to their particular aspirations. Bound up in work as well as family contexts, they provide a distinct opportunity to relate course material to those larger worlds; and their experience in those worlds can be brought into the course context in informative ways through sensitive instruction.

In addition, because they are settled in the geographic area surrounding the University and have both a history and a future in the area, they are likely to promote the goals of the University in the

region. Their success in attaining a degree and their links with the area mean that some of the University's most capable graduates will remain in the region, a resource for cultural and economic development. In significant ways, the established student, more than the typical and possibly more transient student, is likely to be in a position to effectively represent the University to the community and the community to the University in potentially creative ways.

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